

NOCTURNAL

Tiger Sharks

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It was a standard moonless night at Bagram Air Base in northern Afghanistan. Those of you who have been there or to similar Forward Operating Locations (FOLs) know exactly what we're talking about. It was dark. How dark you ask?

You wouldn't see General Franks if he walked 2 feet in front of you, in fact, you wouldn't have known anyone was there. Marching orders from the Army brass were crystal clear: flightline operations would be conducted under blacked-out conditions. Consequently, the 75th Fighter Squadron Tiger Sharks faced a dilemma; tell the leadership they could not fly at night due to lack of blacked-out operational training or alternatively, develop a safe, logically-developed Operational Risk Management (ORM) plan to provide the Combined Force Air Component Commander with the A-10's one-of-a-kind strike capability 24 hours a day. That decision was easy. The road ahead would require a total team effort from the squadron.

First Things First

The first obstacle facing the Tiger Sharks was the stark fact that no one in the squadron had ever

completed a Night-Vision Goggle (NVG) takeoff or landing. Pilots completed initial ground training, consisting of reviewing both the *Fighter NVG Quick-Look Test Report* and the 422 Test Evaluation Squadron's (TES) *Evaluation of NVG Taxi, Takeoff, and Landing Operations*. Additionally, the 422 TES provided platform instruction and techniques at Pope AFB immediately prior to the Tiger Sharks' departure to their Area of Responsibility (AOR). Once in theater, the Tiger Sharks handpicked their most experienced NVG Instructor Pilots (IPs) to develop Bagram-specific NVG takeoff and landing procedures. Pilots flew their initial night sortie at Bagram with an NVG IP, utilizing a building block approach: upgrading pilots would fly their first-ever NVG approach to a low approach, then make a full-stop landing on their second attempt. After several weeks of training, the

entire squadron became NVG takeoff and landing capable.

Blacked-Out Environment

Bagram nighttime operations forced the Tiger Sharks to face numerous wartime challenges never experienced in day-to-day training. For instance, prior to the pilot's arrival, maintenance troops, weapons loaders, and crew chiefs had to prepare the A-10s using illumination from only blue chemsticks and red-lensed miniature flashlights. Accustomed to working under massive "football stadium" floodlights at Pope, crews quickly and safely adapted their procedures to the unfriendly nighttime environment. The prevention of Foreign Object Damage (FOD) became a huge priority. Items that were normally double-checked on a daily basis were now triple- or

Blackout operations require a total team effort ...



Photo by SrA JoAnn S. Makinano

weapons fashioned red lense covers for their jammers ...

even quadruple-checked for accountability. Marshallers replaced their flashlight wands and instead used blue chem-sticks to convey their taxi instructions to pilots. As an extra safety precaution, expeditors became designated safety observers for launch and recovery. Equipped with a set of NVGs, expeditors made certain that combat operations were conducted in a safe manner.

To minimize nighttime maintenance, aircraft were rotated based on each day's tasking; however, eliminating nighttime maintenance altogether was not an option. Weapons troops fashioned red lenses for jammers and other support vehicles from cardboard, duct tape, and red plastic. Spotters were used to transport munitions and stores

from storage areas to the flightline when equipment could not be pre-positioned prior to sunset. Spotters walked in front of tow vehicles and ensured the path ahead was clear.

"Cleared to Taxi"

Tiger Shark pilots required blacked-out transportation from the Air Force compound at Bagram to the flightline and this task fell to the 75th Fighter Squadron Life Support shop. Driving at night is difficult. Driving at night at Bagram in the dusty, overcrowded, cramped flightline environment proved to be an insurance agent's worst nightmare. Demonstrating American ingenuity at its best, life support personnel rigged up a set of spare NVGs and attached them to a mounting

bracket — this somewhat crudely fashioned rig provided life support troops the wherewithal to complete more than 600 runs over a 4-month period, all without a single incident. Eventually, the life support shop received their own monocular NVGs which provided them with a more user-friendly NVG capability. The initial cadre of life support personnel ensured continued success by training follow-on troops in their self-taught art of blacked-out flightline driving.

Transporting Pilots

Upon arrival at the jets, walk-arounds and flight control checks had to be accomplished in near pitch-black conditions. As aircraft prepared to taxi, every available body on the flightline placed IR chem-lights

on the edges of the taxiway to aid the pilot in maneuvering his aircraft from the cramped parking area. Using these chem-sticks and the A-10's IR taxi light, pilots taxied along the narrow taxiways to the arming area. It was vitally important to stay on the taxiway, if for no other reason than the close proximity of Soviet-laid minefields! Once pilots made it safely to the arming area, weapons troops located and pulled over 30 armament pins, ensuring that each weapon would function properly.

"Cleared for Takeoff"

After a final safety check, pilots taxied their armed A-10s into takeoff position on a 180-foot wide slab of pocked concrete they referred to as a runway. Unfortunately, only 90 feet of the runway width was usable ("usable" = the roughest ride you'd ever want to experience in a fighter aircraft). Once cleared for takeoff, pilots used their NVGs to clear for obstructions and enemy activity as they raced down the runway toward the blackness beyond the IR runway lights. It was dark even with the NVGs on; it was even darker without them. The use of NVGs at Bagram made takeoffs at night safer and more importantly made landings at night possible.

After flying a combat mission and landing safely, the Tiger Shark team reversed the launch sequence and made sure aircraft made it safely back to parking. As life support drivers picked up pilots, maintenance troops began preparing aircraft for their next mission. As the sky above the mountains east of Bagram began to glow with the coming of a new dawn, the nocturnal Tiger Sharks put away their NVGs and returned to their tents, secure in the knowledge that they had saved

countless American and coalition lives.

Thoughts

The challenges of NVG operations in a blacked-out bare-base would mean many firsts for the Tiger Sharks and the Air Force. In fact, prior to operations at Bagram Air Base, NVG takeoffs and landings in an A-10 had only been accomplished 7 years previous by the 422 TES, and then only under ideal testing conditions. The 75th Fighter Squadron experience at Bagram demonstrated that ORM is a force enabler. The Tiger Sharks found a way to perform an extremely difficult combat task smartly with a safe building-block approach. While recognizing the inherent hazards of NVG operations on a bare-base, personnel mitigated the risks around them by learning to walk before they ran.

Ground troops in the surrounding areas depended on the Tiger Sharks to make the Close Air Support (CAS) mission happen. To say the Tiger Sharks performed admirably is an understatement of grand magnitude: in theater for more than 100 days, the Tiger Sharks did not miss a single tasking and flew 760 combat sorties while maintaining a 90.1 percent mission capable rate. Applying common-sense ORM kept Bagram operations as covert and safe as possible while providing real-time CAS airpower to ground forces in danger's way. ▶



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